

IV.i.: Conclusion

Christine Berberich, University of Portsmouth

Holocaust commemoration can – and should – take many forms. It should not be limited to just one day a year, nor should it be restricted to just one group of people, or certain institutions. Smaller-scale commemoration can be just as insight- and impactful as official talks, or the curated work found in large, dedicated museums. Over the past five years I have been lucky enough to experience a very personal and emotive form of commemoration in the form and shape of traditional storytelling. I first met Shonaleigh in July 2013 when I was hosting an international conference on Holocaust commemoration in contemporary culture at the University of Portsmouth, and Shonaleigh joined us as both a speaker and as teller of traditional stories for one of the evenings. Shonaleigh is a Drut’syla, a traditional Jewish Storyteller – and it is believed that she currently is the only remaining practicing Drut’syla.¹ She is also the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor. The stories she told that evening, but also the way she told them, blew me away. It was a form of ‘commemoration’ I had not encountered before – both polished and raw and engendering a deeply emotive response that I had not quite expected. Since that evening, I have listened to Shonaleigh’s traditional tales many times – and it is always a unique experience, responding to audience responses or demands, seamlessly shifting from one story into another without a script, never following a set plan. Listening to her made me think about the unique way her traditional stories address contemporary concerns; but also how these stories, often centuries old, engage with ‘Holocaust commemoration’ in a different way. In March 2017 I was lucky enough to interview Shonaleigh for this special issue, to find out more about her art, but also to ask how she considers it to fit into a Holocaust commemoration that, as the introduction has shown, has become institutionalized, standardized and quasi ritualized. Her responses are revealing and also serve to admirably conclude this Special Issue that has been trying to probe traditional modes of commemoration and offer alternative approaches to it.

CB:

Tell me a little bit ... about yourself, about what you do, and how you learnt what you do.

Shonaleigh:

Okay, my name is Shonaleigh, my Hebrew name is Shanalea Khymberg and I'm a Drut'syla. A Drut'syla is a Yiddish oral storyteller. The word is probably derived from 'dertseyler' [Yiddish for 'storyteller'] and it means to have learnt these stories from your own mother, and it is a very specific type of telling. It's where you start learning at four, and you learn twelve cycles of stories. Each cycle has about 300 stories in it, and they are all learnt in a very specific way. Because it's a woman's tradition, it was always learnt orally. ... At four you start learning through a set of kinaesthetic games so you begin to hold all of the stories physically in your body. You then go on to learn what we call drut'syla midrash which is not like a rabbinical midrash. It's purely a way of going through a series of exercises to internalise and learn these stories that have been passed down for a very long time. It was very popular around the Netherlands and among Northern European Jews. So popular that there is virtually no documentation on it. Because it was a woman's tradition it was considered not really worth documenting as a serious practice. And then of course with the events of the Shoah and the Second World War something that was as common as paper cuts in our universe was thrashed, it was no more. It was pretty much wiped out overnight because the people who held it were elderly women and young girls and obviously their survival time was pretty short. I happen to have that tradition by luck more than anything. My grandmother survived. She had sent my mother on one of the last Kindertransports to Europe. The last one, actually, out of the Netherlands that shouldn't have taken any Dutch children but it did take a few. So she [my grandmother] came to England after the war and was living with us when I was born. She was my primary carer, and so she just kind of gave me everything. The way I describe it is that I'm not particularly talented or special, I just happened to be in the right place at the right time and get the right bag of sweets. [...]

CB:

Thanks for that detailed answer. So – what do you think is the way of Holocaust commemoration in the twenty-first century, and how do you think storytelling might fit into that?

Shonaleigh:

Well, I have quite radical views on that. ... I think Holocaust commemoration – and if you filmed me, I've just done the "air brackets" – the marking, the ritual marking of an event is important. But I think it's important because we should learn. If you look at the stories that I tell, people will say 'well, what relevance are they today?' Because they are archetypes, they are metaphors, they resonate, they are ways of dealing with the unbearable because they are in a story. But also, you still get today the soldier who can't speak of death, the woman who

has had her voice taken away, the monster that can never be looked at in full light. All of these things are held within these stories. And so what I would say, in answer to that question, is: I think we are commemorating it [the Holocaust] because it was horrific – and bound up with the fact that it should never happen again. What I have been bleating on about for years is that on Holocaust Memorial Day we show the pictures of the camps, we show this, we show that. Anyone with half a brain knows that is horrific. But that is actually the result; it's the symptom of a disease. If we are to commemorate we should be looking at what caused it. If we were studying what causes Fascism, rather than beating our breasts or renting our garments over these terrible images, we would see everything coming – all those things that are happening now. And we'd be able to head things off. And people might have been able to do that then, too. But we don't and we didn't. People didn't spot Fascism, they didn't spot what turned neighbours against each other. That is almost too uncomfortable. But that's what stories do. They make you do that. People in a modern world think that a story is this perfect little thing that you can then moralise over and learn from, and that it will give you a moral or a happy-ever-after ending. And that is the modern perception of what storytelling is. But in my tradition it is very different. The stories are grubby and they are dirty, and they sometimes don't have happy endings; they have outrageous hope, but not happy endings a lot of the time; they can be sexist; they can be violent; they can be all of those things. In a modern world, people find this disturbing – although the images they have become used to from television are far worse to what is held in the stories. But there is this perception that your 'wondertale' will be this lovely little thing that you can tell a child with a moral at the end of it. But the stories in my tradition are not like that. They were designed to go beyond that. ... People will say 'how do we learn?' And naïve people will say 'stories will change the world – however we tell them, in a book, in a piece of literature'. But the point is: stories won't change the world. If that was the case the world would already be changed. But, from my point of view, what my tradition and the stories that I hold do is that they create a space where the difficult question can be discussed and can be asked. And once we start asking the difficult questions and discussing them, that is for me what 'memorial' is.

CBer:

That makes a lot of sense. Would you then say that storytelling is an addition, or should be an addition, to what might be considered a more 'traditional' approach to Holocaust commemoration and education?

Shonaleigh:

I think that, actually, to not include it is like taking away one of your vital senses. You know, we talk about the telling of the tales without understanding what a story does. We encourage people to tell their stories... So yes, is my answer. If I could divert for just a second, I've just done a piece called 'Turning the Tide' with Hull Truck where we have been dealing with the triple trawler disaster that happened in 68 where an entire community, 60 men, disappeared in ten days. Lost at sea through horrific mismanagement. And what we have done is woven traditional telling in with that, with forms of theatrical presentation, song, written dialogues, telly newsreels, and narrative, books, TV interviews, radio interviews, all of that. And the first night we did it, everyone was like 'oh my god, there's not a person in the audience who hasn't lost someone on these three ships'. And I was a bit worried that people would see the tradition of telling as a bit frivolous. But that was actually the thing that allowed them to connect on an emotive level. Not the newsreels. They were too painful. Not the testimonies. Not all of that. The thing that allowed them to see the situation clearly for what it was – which was horrific loss and a collective mourning, and a responsibility, and a moving forward – was not the facts in front of them. It was the stories that were much much older. Because they are collective wisdom, in a sense. And in a modern world we look at these stories and think 'oh, they are parables for this or that' and we have quite a patronising attitude. But actually they hold the collective wisdom of communities over many many years. And so yes, to come back to the question, absolutely, I think it is vital to use stories to educate and to commemorate.

CBer:

It obviously is a very old tradition, as you have just explained, the traditional art of storytelling. So, when we come back to Holocaust commemoration, at the moment there are a lot of different and 'new' things that try to push the boundaries a bit. How do you feel about them? How do you feel about things such as Holocaust fiction? Presentations of the Holocaust in film? Heaven forbid presentations of the Holocaust in ice dancing shows as we have recently seen in Russia? What would your take be on that? Would it be charitable and say 'pushing boundaries is good, it makes people talk and think, it raises awareness'? Or would you say there should be limits?

Shonaleigh:

My first reaction would be a charitable one, yes, it gets people talking. But the big question is – why? What does it achieve? Does it achieve an intelligent discussion where we can move forward? Is it reinventing the wheel? Is it pushing boundaries for the sake of pushing boundaries? Is it because we have to engage the young, therefore we have to do something

new? Nowadays, my average students [interested in storytelling] are between twenty and thirty. They find that – once you have gotten through the original barrier, that this is old – it actually is a way of pushing boundaries. Especially the Drut'syla material allows you to connect, to make new things, to do innovative thinking by using traditional methods. I think that we have to push boundaries because that is the way we move forward. Absolutely. And if you are working from a solid base, that's been tried and tested, your boundaries, lets change that word to 'what you will innovate and produce' will be so much further along the line ... because you are pushing off from a solid base rather than a sandy base, or a strange idea, or something that is slightly skewed and ending up much further away from the target. It depends on what you want to achieve. My questions would be 'why?' and 'what do you want to achieve?' and 'does this achieve it?'

CBer:

That's an interesting point. As you said earlier, if it sparks an intelligent discussion and allows us to move forward, then it would be really important. But what do you mean by 'moving forward'? Where could Holocaust commemoration then move forward to, if we project into the future a little bit?

Shonaleigh:

Okay, if we project forward to places where you would have debates in schools, that would be a good thing. Just take the way that things are at the moment; there is a lot of hate around. That has always been there. It is not a new thing. It's just that people didn't feel comfortable or safe expressing their ... ignorant attitudes out loud. And now, because of the way things are going, they feel more at ease doing that. Which begs a question: have we moved forward, or have we just put a bandaid over things? Have we changed people's attitudes? Or have we just made it so that negative attitudes go underground? Moving forward means genuinely changing people's attitudes, not just creating an environment where they don't feel that they can get away with it, but genuinely changing people's attitudes to the point where now, that we are looking at the behaviour of the generations behind us, we find it unbelievable that people would behave like that. ... We can't find it unbelievable today because people are still doing it... That's what I mean by moving forward. To get to a place where you would go 'I can't believe they actually used to do that'.

CBer:

That's a really important point and links to my final question that is about passing down your art. I know that you are training your son to learn your stories, or to pass your stories on to future generations. What do you expect from that, or what is your hope for the future by

passing on your art? You said before that it is very much an art that has, unfortunately, disappeared and you are now one of the very few practitioners of this art. What do you hope for the future in relation to your own art?

Shonaleigh:

I have two apprentices now, both under twenty-five who have committed to the next twenty years of learning this – which is amazing. I have the International School of Storytelling who came to me and said ‘what do you need to make sure this doesn’t die’. And so my first priority is to document all the stories because they are in my head. If I get knocked down by a bus they are gone, although there are smatterings of them within literature. The huge latticed cycles, they are in the head of a Drut’syla. So it’s to document and to pass over, and then to pass the Drut’syla midrash on which I do with my students. So in five years, ten years, fifteen years, twenty years time, in an ideal world there would be a number of people that maybe did not know all the cycles but knew one cycle, you know, to reduce the chances of stories getting lost. And then the Drut’sylas teach, you know, the Drut’syla drash. It’s a way of looking at the world, and it actually makes you more tolerant, more resilient, open to discussion. So in an ideal world, you know, for me it’s first of all about archiving, preserving, then passing on, and then dissemination. That’s kind of my goal.

Shonaleigh’s different stages for ensuring the revival of and longevity of her art, ‘archiving, preserving, then passing on, and then dissemination’ effectively reflect the different stages of Holocaust commemoration to date: first came the archiving of the crimes against the Jews, both in official history writing and in the more personal writing of the survivors. This led to preservation of Holocaust memory – it is now openly accessible through a variety of official media; it is taught in schools and present on University syllabi; it is represented in art, in literature, in film, and in TV; there are specific Holocaust memorials and museums in most European countries and also worldwide. This means that Holocaust memory can be preserved but also, of course, passed on to future generations – the reason behind many survivors penning their memoirs in the first place. Currently, we appear to be in the ‘dissemination’ stage. Now these memoirs and memories are being shared, adopted and adapted by a new generation and by different groups, no longer restricted to survivors and their immediate descendants. This is achieved, again, through diverse forms and media. Holocaust literature is, as this issue has shown, a torch bearer for new forms of Holocaust commemoration, new

ways of engaging with the stories of the Shoah and providing different perspectives on it. The literary critic Emily Miller Budick explains that ‘time and distance ... provide new possibilities for analysing and theorizing both the historical events and the fictional representations of them. They ... allow us to engage in asking questions of these fictions that raise ethical, psychological, and moral issues not only about the victimizers but about the victims, and finally ... about us, the inheritors of this history’.² Literature allows for all these different perspectives while still being deeply grounded in fact and historical research. In fact, Holocaust fiction also often outlines not only the events of the Shoah but the contributing factors to it: the slow but steady and seemingly systematic radicalization of the society that supported and sustained the Nazi regime without offering much resistance. A pertinent example for this is Audrey Magee’s 2014 novel *The Undertaking*. Focusing on two ordinary Germans, soldier Peter and his catalogue bridge Katharina, it shows how ‘ordinary people’ who were not fanatic Nazi supporters, slowly but surely slipped deeper and deeper into complicity with them. Magee’s novel takes it for granted that readers know about the Holocaust, the actual ‘end result’ of the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Instead of elaborating further on that, it charts the way towards it, the ‘little steps’ that ordinary Germans were prepared to take for a variety of reasons – to fit in, to profit, to please a loved one – without considering their dire consequences. In a similar way, Hubert Mingarelli’s haunting *A Meal in Winter* (2012) chronicles the devastating decisions three ordinary soldiers in Poland have to take when they find a hidden Jew in the forest they are patrolling. Novels such as these contribute successfully to contemporary debates about the Holocaust: not by reiterating the institutionalized discourse about it but by taking that as a given background knowledge and working *backwards* from it, by showing the contributing factors that led to the events of the Shoah in the first place. Other cultural forms – film, photography, social media, computer animations – follow suit. Film or TV productions, such as the German mini-series *Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter / Generation War* (2013) similarly try to chronicle individual culpability, outlining that it wasn’t only the out-and-out perpetrators but also the mere bystanders that contributed, consciously or unconsciously, to the Shoah. Exhibitions such as the previously mentioned *Yolocaust* ask us about *why* and in which frame of mind we visit sites of commemoration.³ Each of these new cultural representations tries to find its own way of engaging with the events of the Shoah, thus ensuring that there is no lasting silence, but that the Holocaust continues to be taught, read about, and discussed.

The articles in this special issue do, potentially, cover contentious terrain. By discussing and analysing work on the Holocaust that might, initially, destabilise our

preconceived notions of what Holocaust commemoration should and shouldn't do – the Holocaust 'comedy', for instance, the perpetrator account, the comic, the computer game, the Instagram snap – they do, effectively, ask us to look at ourselves. What do 'we' expect from Holocaust commemoration? Just complaining about the static nature of official commemorative acts does not move the subject forward, nor does it change those commemorative acts. So how can 'we' contribute to a meaningful discussion of Holocaust commemoration and, ultimately, help formulate a commemorative discourse that is both respectful *and* challenging, both ethically sound *and* pushing boundaries, and that includes and has meaning for new generations? In his speech to mark the opening ceremony for the New Holocaust History Museum at Yad Vashem on 15 March 2005, Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel pertinently asked 'what does one do with memories?'⁴ Wiesel, despite his often publicised distrust of cultural representations of the Holocaust such as Holocaust fiction and film, dedicated his life to being a 'messenger' – of passing on the memories of the Holocaust. But he realised that it was not enough for him and other survivors to be the messengers. At the end of his speech, he impelled his audience to follow in his footsteps: 'What is our role? We must become the messenger's messenger'.⁵

Shonaleigh now has the support of the International School of Storytelling to help 'preserve' her art. But she also has two young apprentices who are learning from her, who are familiarising themselves with the story circles that she herself learnt from her 'Bubbe', her grandmother. They are becoming her messengers. But it is probably safe to say that Shonaleigh's apprentices will *not* tell the stories in exactly the same way that she herself is telling them. They will imbibe them with their own life experiences, with their own thoughts about the past and with their own hopes for the future. That way, the stories will be preserved – but, at the same time, will have a new relevance to a new generation of tellers, as well as a new generation of listeners.

In a similar way, it is up to all of us to take up the torch of Holocaust commemoration and become 'messengers': to engage with the topic, to write about it, to teach it, to ensure that it is never forgotten. But it is important to not lose sight of those questions that Shonaleigh formulated in the interview: why are we commemorating the Holocaust in a certain way, and what do we want to achieve by it? When the light faded over the ice rink in Russia, and Tatyana Navka and Andrew Burkovsky had finished their Holocaust-themed ice-

dancing routine that I have opened this Special Issue with, they certainly achieved one thing: people *were* talking about them. But they were not necessarily talking meaningfully about the actual Holocaust, and that was the problem. Navka's intentions were, probably, good. But she had, if we wanted to be charitable, underestimated the emotional impact that the Holocaust still has; and she had, clearly, *not* thought about what is and what is not ethical in Holocaust commemoration. 'Today', Bernhard Giesen writes, 'the Holocaust has acquired the position of a free-floating myth or a cultural icon of horror and inhumanity'.⁶ As such, he elaborates, it has become mythologized – and that is deeply problematic, as it 'has turned what once was inconceivable and traumatic into an almost trivial and well-known background knowledge'.⁷ Navka and Burkovsjy's *La vita è bella* performance trivialized the Holocaust in a way that Roberto Benigni's original film of 1997 had not. The setting for their routine in a televised entertainment show was all wrong; it did not allow for reflective engagement for what was being watched; it did not communicate the message of hope in adversity that the film had managed to convey. Instead, it was simply a piece of kitsch and trite entertainment that upset a lot of people.

The line between, on the one hand, meaningful and, on the other, ultimately disrespectful Holocaust commemoration is thus a thin one, full of pitfalls and controversy. But many cultural contributions to Holocaust commemoration that initially encounter opposition – Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, for instance, or László Nemes's controversial film *Son of Saul* of 2015 – spark a meaningful public and critical debate that manages to contribute positively to ongoing discussions about Holocaust commemoration. The articles in this special issue, with their focus on 'new' forms of literature, different kinds of engagement with the Holocaust, and the pertinent questions they ask about past and present commemorations of the events of the Shoah, will hopefully further contribute to this meaningful discussion.

References

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¹ See <https://www.shonaleigh.uk/2017/01/24/article-living-traditions/> for more information.

² Budick, *The Subject of Holocaust Fiction*, 11.

³ See <https://yolocaust.de>.

⁴ Wiesel, 'Speech I', n.p.

⁵ Wiesel, 'Speech II', 8mins 14secs – 8mins 16secs.

⁶ Giesen, 'The Trauma of Perpetrators', 143.

⁷ Giesen, 'The Trauma of Perpetrators', 143.